

# English Music in the 20th Century

## Thomas Adès b.1971

I believe new music should take you to new places, via soundscapes and landscapes of feeling you hadn't thought could exist. For me, that's something Thomas Adès does in different ways in pretty well every piece. No composer of his generation (he is now 44) has written music that makes me want to return to it again and again to explore the fundamental questions about the job music does and the mechanics therein.

That's because Adès performs one of the greatest sleights of hand a composer is capable of. His music – for instance, the first piece I heard of his, *Darknesse Visible* for solo piano – makes you hear things you thought you were familiar with as if they were completely new. *Darknesse Visible* transforms the piano into an instrument that's alchemically capable of sustaining a continuous line of melody; the technique of ceaseless tremolo that Adès demands of the player conjures a ghostly shimmer from the instrument. You feel you're experiencing the piano as apparition as much as reality – a heightened sonic surrealism that Adès's music often achieves with different media and in different contexts.

This piece is simultaneously an "explosion", as Adès says, of a John Dowland lute song, and an expressive distancing from it, as if you're seeing and hearing Dowland's tune with a shuttering or a doubleness in the image. It's not just about the instruments Adès uses and how he uses them, either – although that kind of imagination is as vivid when he's writing for the largest orchestra. Listen to the opening of his 1997 orchestral piece *Asyla*, with its cowbells and quarter-tone-flat upright piano, to hear what I mean.

Adès also makes you hear and assess the fundamentals of music all over again: the bare intervals that remain the building blocks of the vast majority of contemporary classical music; the humble third or fourth or fifth, or the supposedly simple major and minor chords, or the forms that are still the touchstones for teachers, historians and music-makers the world over, those hoary old classics like "binary form" or "sonata form". Have a listen to how Adès takes a pattern of familiar intervals in the slow second movement of *Asyla* (a typically punning Adèsian title, meaning places of refuge as well as enclaves of madness), starting with that breathtaking melody for the epicurean timbre of the bass oboe, and makes them sound rich and strange. To hear the way he makes chords resonate in new ways, try his 2007 orchestral piece *Tevot* (written, like *Asyla*, for Simon Rattle, but this time for the Berlin Philharmonic instead of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra). Above all, listen to its ending, which finds an A-major chord that shimmers like no other I've heard. For the way he does the same to entire forms, listen to the Piano Quintet, a fully fledged sonata form movement that makes its recapitulation a musical black hole of time and tonality, sucking up the material you've been listening to for the last quarter of an hour into a couple of frantic but inevitable-sounding minutes.

But all this is really a tangent to what I think Adès's real achievement has become in recent years – and what it could mean for the music he will write in the future (not least the new opera he is working on, his third, to be based on Luis Buñuel's film *The Exterminating Angel*). To hear it, the best place to start is the opera he wrote for Covent Garden in 2004: *The Tempest*, which uses a brilliantly effective rhyming distillation of Shakespeare's play in the libretto by Meredith Oakes. Adès casts his singers adrift on an island of music of his own conjuring, as any composer writing music for *The Tempest* must. But more than that, in writing this piece, Adès has found a way of hearing, a way of navigating the relationships between one note and another, that marks *The Tempest* as the place where a truly Adèsian world is magicked into being.

Above all, the sounds in *The Tempest* are, I find, some of the most unforgettable and most moving of any recent music. The same is true for the other big pieces Adès has composed in the last few years: *Tevot*, the Violin Concerto, and his latest orchestral piece, *Polaris*. Adès talks about hearing the "magnetism" in each note of *Polaris*, every one of which becomes, under his composer's microscope, a seething mass of musical possibilities.

To hear what I'm talking about, listen to Violin Concerto: *Concentric Paths*, which he composed in 2005. In just 20 minutes, this three-movement piece does something magical. The way it swirls ethereally in the first movement, exerts a tragic and vice-like grip in the chaconne-like second part and finally propels you into the uninhibited flight of the finale is like being spun into an infinite space.

Yet you never lose your footing, never lose a sense of where you are, even as you glimpse an unbounded region out there behind the notes. Technically, that's because of Adès's seemingly infinitely subtle and infinitely expandable tonal universe. As with all really good music, however, it's a piece whose detail is endlessly absorbing but whose emotional impact is immediate and impossible to resist. In my opinion, at least. See what you think as you delve into the *Asyla* and *Arcadiana* of Adès's music.